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ABSTRACT

All states are addressing the problems of accommodations for English Language Learners (ELL's) in state assessment systems, but Massachusetts is noteworthy for the way in which it handles this problem. Since the early 1980s, over 40 states have created a statewide assessment program. Testing in these states is typically modeled on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. ELL's, sometimes called limited English proficient students, have traditionally been exempted from state assessments and other standardized tests. Since no data on their achievement was available, reports often provided a skewed picture of how students in schools and districts were progressing. This policy, usually designed to protect ELL's from the unpleasantness of taking a test for which they were not prepared, has had a negative impact on educational equity for language minority students. As a result, there has been a move to incorporate ELL's into state assessments. States are beginning to modify assessment programs, usually through test accommodations that include extra time, clarifying directions, flexible scheduling, and the use of bilingual dictionaries and glossaries. Native language testing is useful when the student is literate in the native language. Massachusetts has translated all its tests, except Language Arts, to Spanish and uses specialized scoring involving pairs of bilingual and subject content teachers (consensus scoring) through a system developed by Second Language Testing, Inc. Issues related to students who are not literate in Spanish or English proficient are still in the process of resolution, but problems can be worked out with time and attention. Massachusetts plans to use its Grade 10 assessment as a graduation examination, and it is considering how to best accommodate ELL's for this examination. (Contains two references.) (SLD)

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English Language Learners and State Assessments[1]

Charles W. Stansfield, President
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I want to thank MABE for inviting me here today to talk about accommodations for English Language Learners (ELLs) in state assessment systems. This is a very important topic, not only in Massachusetts, but across the nation. All states are addressing this issue, but not all have been as enlightened in the way they address it as Massachusetts. I hope my remarks today will give you a better understanding of the way Massachusetts is handling this issue, an understanding that will help you as you prepare your students for these tests.

Background on State Assessment Systems

NAEP. Since the early 1980s, over 40 states have created a statewide assessment program. The testing of students in these programs is typically modeled on NAEP, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which was first administered in 1969. NAEP was designed to serve as a monitor of school achievement in the core areas of reading, writing, math, and science, and in other areas as well. NAEP is administered in grades 4, 8, and 12 to a representative national sample of students. NAEP results are used

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1 Text of an invited opening plenary session at the annual conference of the Massachusetts Association of Bilingual Educators, Leominster, MA, March 4, 1998.

[2]Second Language Testing, Inc. (10704 Mist Haven Terrace, N. Bethesda, MD 20852, ph. 301-231-6046, fax 301-231-9536) carried out the adaptation to Spanish of the Mathematics and Science + Technology assessments that are part of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). MCAS assessments are based on approved state standards and curriculum frameworks. The program tests nearly all children in Massachusetts at grades 4, 8, and 10. For additional information on the MCAS, see the Mass DOE website at www.doe.mass.edu.

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to identify gains or declines in educational achievement in the nation as a whole. This is why NAEP is referred to as The Nation's Report Card.

State Assessment Programs. State assessment programs can be traced back to the late 1970s. They are an extension of the education reform movements that have occurred over the past 25 years. These have been called the back-to-the-basics movement, the accountability movement, the minimum competency movement, and standards-based reform. Like NAEP, state assessment programs test students in grades 4, 8 and 10, although the exact grades may vary. State assessment programs differ from NAEP in that nearly all students at specific grade levels participate in them. Stakes for students taking state assessments are low, since the results of state assessments determine neither grades nor promotion. The one exception to this is the use of a state assessment as a high school graduation test. This is done in 17 of the 48 states that have state assessment programs. The results of state assessments are released to districts, schools, and the press. These results are usually the percentage of students judged as passing the test, or the percentage of students scoring at different proficiency levels on the tests.

In recent years, with the passage of the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) which calls for schools to require the same high standards for all students, and as public concern for the quality of education has increased, the results of state assessments have come to acquire increasing importance for districts and schools. As the general public learns how its school district is doing, this information influences judgements about the quality of the local educational system. Districts doing poorly on these assessments, may find themselves having political problems with the voters or with the state board of education or even the federal government. In some cases, state departments of education have taken control of local school districts, effectively taking away local control and putting the management of the district in the hands of the state.

How Have State Assessment Systems Dealt with ELLs?

English language learners or ELLs sometimes called limited English proficient students have traditionally been exempted from state assessments and other standardized tests. In fairness to the old policy of exempting them from taking the test, I must say that it was basically designed to protect the student from the unpleasant experience of taking a test that he or she was not ready to take, because of their limited English reading or writing skills. However, the exemption of ELLs meant that the district was not held accountable for their educational achievement. Since no data on their achievement was available, reports could not include these students and as a result often provided a skewed picture of how students in schools and districts were progressing. This has had a very negative impact on educational equity for language minority students. We see this impact when such students are not encouraged to take demanding courses. Too often because they won't be tested with other students or their scores will not be reported with those of other students, they are tracked into remedial programs, rather than into college preparation and advanced placement programs.

During the nineties, educators have become aware that exclusion through exemption has produced undesirable consequences. As a result, we have seen a move to incorporate ELLs into assessment programs. However, inclusion is not a simple matter. If ELLs are to be given the opportunity to show what they know and can do on tests, appropriate instruction must be in place, and the test program must be modified to accommodate the differences that ELLs bring to the test situation.

What are those differences?

Clearly, ELLs differ from native English speakers in that they all have a native language other than English, and they are in the process of learning English as a second language. However, it must be remembered that ELLs come from diverse national and cultural backgrounds. They differ in whether or not they have been educated in their native language and in the amount and quality of native language education they have received. These differences mean that

adjusting a testing program to accommodate ELLs is a complex matter, and no single accommodation will meet the needs of all ELLs faced with a state assessment.

What are states doing today to include ELLs in the assessment process?

In recent years, states have begun to modify their assessment program to address the needs of ELLs. Some states have modified their tests, but the most common modification, or accommodation as they are more often called, has been in test administration policies. These accommodations include allowing extra time to complete the test, small group administration, clarifying directions, flexible scheduling of the test administration, and the use of bilingual dictionaries and glossaries. Now lets examine each of these accommodations.

Extra time. The majority of states that have state assessments allow extra time for ELLs. This, like most other accommodations, is supposed to reduce the effect on the test score of the student's limited English proficiency. If the student has an advanced level of English proficiency, extra time may go a long way toward leveling the playing field. However, if the student is at the beginning or low intermediate level, extra time is likely to be of little benefit. And of course, if the student knows practically no English, extra time will be of no help. Thus, we see that extra time only aids some or our students, not all. I should also mention that in some states extra time is considered to provide an unfair advantage to ELLs. As a result, their assessment policies prohibit it. However, extra time for ELLs is appropriate, since their reading speed and processing time is generally slower than that of native English speaking students.

Making the student more comfortable. The majority of states also try to make the ELL more comfortable while taking the test. This is done by allowing the student to take the test in a familiar room, and with a familiar teacher, such as an ESL or bilingual education teacher, rather than the regular classroom teacher or

test administrator. Another common accommodation designed to make the ELL more comfortable is to schedule the test more flexibly. In other words, the ELL may take the test in shorter segments spread over more days. About half the states permit the teacher administering the test to ELLs to repeat the directions, or to simplify or clarify the directions. This may not seem like an accommodation, but on a standardized test, normally all students are read the same identical directions. Indeed, one of the meanings of the word "standardized" is that all students get administered the test in exactly the same way.

Bilingual dictionaries and glossaries. In about half the states, ELLs are being allowed to use bilingual dictionaries and glossaries. A bilingual dictionary is one that contains cross-lingual translations of words. The student can use the bilingual dictionary to look up an English word which he or she doesn't recognize. The use of monolingual dictionaries in English or the foreign language is more controversial, since monolingual dictionaries define terms and by doing so, they may give away answers on a test. Bilingual glossaries are particularly useful, since they can be used more efficiently by the student than a bilingual dictionary. A glossary is simply a list of words, and a bilingual glossary is a cross-lingual list of words that appear on the test. The words to appear in a glossary are best identified by an ESL or bilingual teacher, since these teachers are most likely to know those words on the test that may be unfamiliar to students.

Native language testing. Testing in the student's native language is another accommodation. However, only seven states (Arizona, California, Hawaii, New York, Rhode Island, Texas) are doing this. Fortunately, Massachusetts now joins the list of states that allow this accommodation, at least in Spanish. The native language test can be either a translated version of the English language test, or it can be different to some degree or to a large degree. Because most translated tests involve some degree of change, they are normally called adaptations. Not all tests are easily amenable to translation. Language arts tests usually require extensive

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modification. Here is a page from a commonly used language arts test on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Now, what will happen when we translate this page which deals with dictionary usage skills? All the words will begin with different letters in different languages. So, in this case, in order to test in the student's native language, an alternative section will have to be created containing completely new stimuli and items. Still, language arts tests can be adapted successfully to other languages and it is unfortunate that for political reasons, as you know too well, language arts tests are often not adapted into the student's native language. You may remember the Voluntary National Test that President Clinton proposed to create for 4th grade reading and 8th grade math. Well, only the math test was going to be translated to Spanish.

We should remember that native language testing is only useful if the students are literate in their native language. This either requires that they be educated before coming to this country or that they receive content instruction in their native language in this country. Because many ELLs don't fit this profile, native language testing only accommodates some ELLs. But for these students, native language testing can be a reasonably valid means of assessment.

What is Massachusetts doing?

You should be pleased about many of the actions that Massachusetts has taken to accommodate ELLs into the state assessment program. For one, the Assessment and Accountability Office of the State Department of Education has appointed an ELL Advisory Committee consisting of about a dozen ESL and bilingual educators from around the state. The committee helps the state design policies affecting ELLs.

The Massachusetts Department of Education has decided to translate all the tests, except Language Arts, to Spanish. It is particularly noteworthy that in Massachusetts, items from each test were field tested in Spanish and English items were field tested on

ELLs. Few states do this. This practice has many benefits. It gives information on how the test items perform in English and Spanish with these populations and it helps to ensure that the revised tests are valid for these populations. It also gives educators experience in administering and scoring these tests before they become operational.

Scoring of the native language version.

Another matter that you can be pleased about is the scoring of the Spanish language versions of the MCAS. In order for scores on achievement tests in specific subjects to be perceived as valid, those who score them must have credibility as persons who are in a position to distinguish a good performance from a poor one. This means that scorers of a math or science test should be teachers of math or science. However, there are very few bilingual certified math or science teachers. Because of this, last year the Mass DOE, Advanced Systems, the testing contractor, and my own company, Second Language Testing, Inc., devised a system we call consensus scoring. Consensus scoring pairs two raters who review each test performance jointly and decide on a rating. In this case, the pair consisted of a certified math or science teacher and a bilingual teacher or individual. Consensus scoring was implemented last August when we scored the field tests written in Spanish. It began with a review of the test and training on the scales that would be used to assign points to each response. Benchmark papers in English were reviewed and discussed by the raters. Then a table full of readers scored several papers written in Spanish. After agreeing on the appropriate ratings, the raters began to score in pairs. The bilingual individual translated the response for the certified teacher and they jointly discussed the performance and agreed on a rating. The certified teachers had all served previously as raters of papers in English.

When we field tested consensus scoring, we learned that it will increase the pool of people who can score papers in Spanish. By the end of the first day of scoring a bilingual individual was generally able to score a paper in Spanish alone, so long as he or

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she had immediate access to the certified math or science teacher who was scoring next to her. Similarly, if the certified teacher had studied Spanish in high school or college, by the end of the day he had learned to recognize the critical elements of the Spanish response. As a result, the certified teacher could also generally score alone, so long as there was immediate access to the bilingual individual in the next seat. This means that the process of scoring papers written in Spanish is not twice as costly as the scoring of papers in English. The finding that it is not as expensive as was originally expected is simply another reason why testing in Spanish should continue.

I should also mention that it is easier for a bilingual teacher to learn to score papers in Spanish, than it is for a certified teacher who has no knowledge of Spanish to learn to read papers in Spanish. As a result, over time, I think we will see bilingual teachers brought in more frequently to rate papers in a variety of subject areas, along side teachers of those subjects. All of this will be good for the professional development and standing of bilingual teachers.

How well did the Spanish language versions work? Well, at the end of the day, scorers discussed the test questions and the responses they had read. They felt that the items functioned in Spanish the same way they functioned in English. This speaks in favor of the validity of the translated form of the test.

Remaining issues

All of this is encouraging, I think. Yet there is a question that I'm sure many of you are concerned about. That question is "What about those ELLs who don't speak Spanish or who are not literate in Spanish? "Will they have to take the MCAS in English?" This year, now that the MCAS is being implemented for the first time, ELLs who have not completed three years of school in the US, will not have to take the MCAS unless it has been determined that they will not need ESL services during the next school year.

Of course there are also some students who have been here for more than three years who are not yet fully proficient in English. I'm sure that some of you, since you are advocates for ELLs, don't think that such students should be forced to take the MCAS in English. I can understand your concern about the outcome of the assessment. However, I believe that we all need to see the big picture, not just the individual student. Past experience has shown that school administrators are relieved when students are exempted from participation in the state's assessment program. Such exemptions, rather than benefiting the student, may actually do harm. They can lead to tracking, segregation, and less effort on the part of the district to help the student achieve to high standards. And that may partially explain why Hispanics have the highest dropout rate (32%) and the highest expulsion rate of any ethnic group in the state of Massachusetts (Mass DOE: 1995, 1996). And, let's not forget, that it's not the student but the district that is being evaluated through the test scores. This evaluation is healthy for all players in the educational system, and most especially the student. So I hope we can all view the inclusion of ELLs in the state's assessment system as a positive development that will have positive benefits.

I want to make one more point. A state assessment program does not guarantee educational equity for language minority students. It is just one component in a whole system that must be designed to work for language minority students. Other components are teachers that are experienced and committed to the education of language minority students, curriculum standards designed to develop the knowledge, skills, and cognitive abilities of all students, encouraging all students to take demanding courses and providing them the support they need to get through them, instruction that is aligned to state curriculum frameworks, and assessments that are aligned to curricula and to instruction. All these indicators must work in unison, and they involve a collaborative effort between the state, school districts, and you, the classroom teacher.

Massachusetts is scheduled to use the grade 10 assessment as a

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graduation test, although this won't go into effect until the year 2003. This means that students who are now in the seventh grade will need to pass these tests in order to graduate. Student scores on the tests will be sent to parents, and percentages of students passing in each district will be released to the press. In addition, state and district scores will be disaggregated by group. This means that comparative data will be released on the scores of each ethnic group on the test, the scores of students receiving special education, and the scores of students who are classified as ELLs. This information will pinpoint inequities in educational outcomes, and provide a baseline from which to move forward. These uses of standards-based test scores present a powerful incentive to prepare these students to pass these tests.

Some teachers may feel the MCAS as a big lemon. Your challenge is to turn it into a lemon chiffon pie. For committed teachers like you, the MCAS presents a unique opportunity. You can use this test as a lever to improve instructional support for your students. Such support can include after school programs, teacher aids, parental involvement, computers, instructional materials, in-service training, and a focused, integrated curriculum within a school system that sets high standards for all students and supports teachers who are committed to having their students achieve those standards.

I hope this information will be helpful to you as you proceed to implement standards and standards-based assessments in Massachusetts. Thank you for inviting me here today to talk about accommodations for ELLs in state assessment systems.

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